

Chester Cooper

Fateful Day in Vietnam—10 Years Ago

for 2/11/75
Sarajevo—1965?

SARAJEVO: capital of the Socialist Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Yugoslavia. Students at Sarajevo perpetrated the murder of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand in 1914. The Austro-Hungarian government used this event as a pretext for the attack on Serbia which led to World War I.

Just about ten years, 50,000 American military deaths and one hundred billion dollars ago, U.S. Air Force 3 landed in the blinding sunlight of Ton Son Nhut airport with a cargo of American officials. At first blush there seemed nothing unusual about this; senior

Mr. Cooper was a member of the National Security Council staff during the Johnson years and is the author of "The Last Crusade," a history of the Vietnam war.

American military and civilian personnel had been virtually commuting back and forth between Washington and Saigon since President Diem's regime began to fall apart in mid-1963. But there was, in fact, something special about the plane which landed that morning in early February, 1965: McGeorge Bundy, Assistant to President Johnson for National Security Affairs, was on board. It was his first visit to Vietnam. He came not to make yet another report to the President on the stability of the Saigon government, not to assess yet again the capabilities of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, not to launch yet one more study of the American aid program. He was there because American policy was at a critical fork in the road. His mission was to recommend which way the Johnson administration should turn.

A few weeks before, Lyndon Johnson had launched his own administration; he was no longer simply finishing out President Kennedy's term. It was now time to seek out new, Johnsonian directions of policy. The American entanglement in Vietnam, already 10 years old when Johnson took the oath of office that January, held in hostage all of his hopes for the next four years. It was time, Bundy said in his Memorandum to the President proposing the trip, to get American policy "off dead center."

The presidential campaign had been marked by a running debate during the summer and autumn of 1964 on American policy toward the Vietnam war. "Why not victory?" was Goldwater's theme as he argued for direct American intervention. Moderation

and patience were the keynotes of Johnson's speeches. He was the "peace candidate." Speaking in Manchester, New Hampshire, in late September, Johnson said, "I have not thought that we were ready for American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys. What I have been trying to do was to get the boys in Vietnam to do their own fighting—we are not going north and drop bombs at this stage of the game."

Events that autumn seemed to underline the spirit of forbearance evoked by Johnson's campaign oratory. As a warning to Hanoi after the Tonkin Gulf incident, the Pentagon stationed (over Secretary Rusk's objections) six B-57s at an airbase near Saigon. In late October, Bien Hoa was attacked. The six B-57s were destroyed and 23 American airmen were killed or wounded. But there was no American military response; Johnson apparently meant what he had said several weeks before. And then, on Christmas Eve, a bomb exploded in an American officer's billet in Saigon. Two were killed, scores were wounded. Still no American military reaction. Hanoi's Washington watchers must have felt very smug.

In late January, with the inauguration and the State of the Union message behind him, Johnson faced some hard choices: to continue the unpromising policy of assistance and advice to the South Vietnamese; to cut American losses and get out leaving whatever Saigon government

happened to be in power that month to carry on; to intervene directly with American forces in order to achieve an early, successful resolution of the fighting. It was agreed that the ultimate decision would wait on Bundy's first-hand report.

Based on intimate exposure to the dramatic events of a decade ago, I believe there were, in fact, only two real choices open to the administration—to get out or to get in more deeply. The more-of-the-same course had proved increasingly costly and reckless with each passing week; it was clearly a non-starter. The get-out option was by no means academic; American officials, even the most ardent supporters of South Vietnam, were disgusted, disillusioned and frustrated with the constant changes of government in Saigon, the conspicuous corruption, the incompetence of the military leadership. "Cut-loose" advocates—Under Secretary George Ball and others both in the administration and on Capitol Hill—had unwitting allies in the flabby South Vietnamese military and

civilian leadership. And so, I believe that on Feb. 3, 1965, as Bundy and his party passed down the line of waiting American Embassy and Vietnamese officials, President Johnson was still pausing warily, still undecided as to which path to follow. The decision would be his, but the men of the National Liberation Front and Hanoi by their own actions could tilt it either way. Perhaps they did not realize the significance of their next move. Per-



McGeorge Bundy

haps they had concluded that Johnson was a man of infinite patience, or of great timidity—a "paper tiger." In any case, they chose to test him once again.

The incident that would force the American decision had been planned well before Bundy's arrival. It would soon transpire, but we had no way of knowing this. Nor did we realize how fateful a coincidence it was that Chairman Kossygin had, at that moment, just arrived in Hanoi. It was in this innocence that the official cavalcade sped off through the streets festively decorated for the Buddhist New Year to inaugurate the second decade of Vietnam.

The first few days of McGeorge Bundy's visit were devoted to the inevitable series of political, economic and military briefings and to meetings with Vietnamese officials and "personalities." These sessions left little room for cheer. The Vietnamese officials were uninspired and uninspiring; the Buddhist monks who were causing continued political unrest had no clear idea (or at least were unable to present a clear idea) as to what they expected from the government; the government had no clear idea of what it planned to do with or for the Buddhists; the students knew what they wanted ("social justice"), but 10 student leaders had 10 definitions of their goal; the euphoria that had seized the Vietnamese people after Diem had been removed had long since eroded into fatalism; the security situation throughout the country and in Saigon itself, was tenuous; the economy was in bad shape and getting worse.

And so, after Bundy had been in Vietnam for several days, "getting out" still seemed to be possible. The chances

were admittedly thin, but in the light of what Bundy had seen at first-hand, Johnson might just be convinced that America's interests would best be served by cutting loose as expeditiously and gracefully as possible—if the Communists laid low, at least as far as American personnel were concerned.

Sunday, Feb. 7, Saigon time
(Saturday, Feb. 6, Washington time)
promised to be a relaxed day. The Vi-

etnamese New Year had not yet ended, and it seemed peaceful enough for Bundy to pay a visit to the countryside. I chose to sleep late and take a swim. We would leave the next morning for Anchorage where we would spend a day writing the final report. But neither the trip to the country nor the swim at the Cercle Sportif was to take place. For on that Sunday 10 years ago started the largest war in American history. Early that morning two hundred miles from Saigon in the town of Pleiku, a platoon of Viet Cong soldiers attacked an American airfield; eight American soldiers were killed, 125 wounded.

The National Security Council was called into session in Washington while at the American military headquarters in Saigon a score or more generals and civilians were trying to sort out what, in fact, had happened at Pleiku. We hardly had a chance to assemble a few bits of information before there was a constant stream of phone calls from the White House. Bundy spent much of the morning looping the 25 yards between the briefing room and the telephone.

We left for Washington later that afternoon. On the plane, we heard the news that bombing attacks on North Vietnam had started. If it occurred to anyone that Kossygin was still in Hanoi, I didn't hear it mentioned. Bundy wrote his report—a lugubrious account of the Vietnamese political, economic and military situation—in the dimly lit cabin high above the Pacific Ocean. There was really not much to say. The Viet Cong had said it all. They had decided which path Johnson would take. And more than a million American soldiers were soon to cross the Pacific in direct response to their message at Pleiku.

In their less serious moments historians are fond of playing "What If?" Well, What If the Communists had not attacked the American airfield at Pleiku that Sunday morning? What If, instead, they had bided their time, exploited the unrest among the Vietnamese Buddhists and students, permitted the new and ineffectual government in Saigon to continue to fumble and stumble, concentrated their military efforts on the poorly led and demoralized Vietnamese irregular units? What If the Viet Cong had studiously avoided attacking American personnel? What If, in short, they had not made the awful miscalculation that they could frighten Lyndon Johnson out of Vietnam and, instead, had undertaken to sweet-talk him out?

Perhaps we were in too deep, even then. Perhaps Lyndon Johnson was only looking for a pretext to intervene in a much bigger way. Twenty thousand or so American military advisers were already scattered all over South Vietnam. Words like "prestige" and "credibility" and "commitment" were already gracing the rhetoric of administration spokesmen. And yet, without Pleiku, it is at least conceivable that the decision could have gone the other way.